



Torah Reflections on *Parashat Yitro*

Exodus 18:1 – 20:23 / *Haftarah* Isaiah 6:1 – 7:6 and 9:5-6

22 Shevat, 5767

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This was my 16-year-old son Jamie's Bar Mitzvah portion. Jamie has a number of special needs, and as my old boss, Rabbi Jeffrey Sirkman says to each *bar-* and *bat-mitzvah* on the *bima*, this was "the perfect portion for him." As he chanted them that morning, the words thundered in my head. Through his crisp and sweet voice, I heard them in a new way.

"All the people witnessed the thunder and the lightening, the blare of the shofar and the mountain smoking. When the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. 'You speak to us', they said to Moses, 'and we will obey but let not G-d speak to us, lest we die.' Moses answered the people, 'Be not afraid for G-d has come only in order to test you, and in order that the fear of G-d may ever be with you so that you do not go astray.' So the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where G-d was." (Exodus 20:15-18)

When Jamie was preparing his Bar Mitzvah *drash*, I remember him asking me first about the Voice. I taught him that there is a tradition that G-d still speaks from Mt. Sinai. It is only because of white noise that we can not hear it clearly. I taught him a family *Musar* tradition that each morning as I begin the transition from sleep to awake, I listen for the Voice. Tradition teaches that this is the best moment for the possibility. He still tells me each morning that he hopes to hear something.

I remember Jamie commenting that the thunder and the lightening was very important. He taught me that the effort to hearken to the Voice despite the cacophony allowed the Hebrews to open their hearts and minds enough so that even sitting in the midst of their fear and anxiety, they could find strength and understanding. We discussed how when I try to create a holy space around a hospital bed, the thunder and lightening are the triggers and emotional baggage that are intensified there. If my spontaneous prayer is effective, then it breaks through and sends a little divine spark heavenward. In his *drash*, Jamie wrote that the Hebrews could do all kinds of things in the future only because they had gone through Egyptian slavery and life in the desert. Just like Jewish people today, they would handle whatever rock or boulder they encountered in their personal lives because the experience of hearing the Voice through the thunder and lightening made things possible.

What does "fear of G-d" mean? The Torah uses it with laws that mandate fair treatment and little acts of loving-kindness and world repair. "*You shall not place a stumbling block in front of a blind person. You shall fear your G-d*" (Lev. 19:14). This example from the *Holiness Code* gives practical applications of the *Ten Commandments*, teaching us how G-d demands that we act with compassion and justice. Ultimately we are to fear G-d rather than people – we have no reason to fear people with special or different needs. Another example is "*You shall not rule over your servant ruthlessly but you shall fear G-d*" (Lev. 25:43). Remember all those Nannygates? This law teaches us that whenever you're dealing with someone whose livelihood puts them in a weaker

position or one that is dependent on you like your nanny, your housecleaner, your gardener, your handyman, or your home care worker for your parent, if you are tempted to take advantage of this imbalance and your own perceived power, remind yourself what G-d demands of us; fear G-d. Another meaning: the whole Exodus narrative here reminds us that the fear of G-d liberates us from fear of other human beings who are stronger than us. Our first heroes are the midwives who stand up to an unjust law. Moses overcomes his personal fear of his disabilities and with his brother's help frees the people. When we are liberated from our fear of other human beings through our fear of G-d, it enhances our morality and our inner strength.

The last lesson of this portion that Jamie and I wish to share with you is something that Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi taught Rabbi Joseph Telushkin. Rabbi Telushkin complained to him about how he got annoyed whenever a conversation was shattered by the loud siren of a passing ambulance. Rabbi Zalman responded, *"Whenever you hear an ambulance, offer a prayer that the ambulance arrives in time. Make a similar prayer when you hear the blaring siren of a fire truck or police car."*

Rabbi Telushkin now teaches that this practice accomplished two things. One, he is no longer annoyed when he hears an ambulance. Second, he realized that he now practices the Golden Rule even for neighbors that he will never meet:

*"Imagine if this prayer became widely practiced, and one day, G-d forbid, you were in an ambulance, and knew that wherever the ambulance passed, people were praying for you."*¹

Jamie and I agreed that this is a good practice. Thunder and lightening and fear of G-d were wonderful life lessons for our people at Sinai. They are not so bad for us today.

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¹ Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *The Ten Commandments of Character: Essential Advice for Living an Honorable, Ethical, Honest Life*, NY: Bell Tower (Random House), 2003, p. 262. This book was brand new when Jamie was writing. It was a perfect early Bar Mitzvah gift for him.